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Routine

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Routine

In this shadowy corner Edna and Mary would hide, safe as the unborn. It was only for a few minutes. It was only because they were old and it was hot and coffee was their drug. When the boss began stirring in her office they would rise from the tired stuffing of the lounge furniture to gather their buckets and rags. But right now it was still early and still safe. The extra skin hung from Edna's upper arm peaceful as an empty hammock.

Mary smoothed the first rivulet of sweat into her short hair. "I wish it weren't so damned hot. I'm always soaked clean through to my brassiere by breaktime."

"Well, wish in one hand and shit in the other and see which fills up first." Edna was a fortune cookie filled with cheap and generalized insights. Mary didn't answer but held the coffee up to her big loose lips, sacrificing to the morning. Steam rose onto her glasses.

"Edna, will you look at that? Damn elephant ankles. I better not even take 'em off now. I'd never get 'em laced again." Mary's swollen feet seemed out of proportion to the quantity of her flesh. With her heels dug into the carpet, her straight, stiff, protruding legs supported the sack of her body like wooden stilts.

"I don't need to look at your ankles, I got two of my own. Big enough to be four. We should get us some little aerobics shoes like Connie has."

Edna straightened her glasses. Mary and Edna wore the same style glasses — large, pink-toned, with scrollish frames as if snails had spent the night trailing over them. Their hair was short and meticulous and razored neatly in the back where it grew in an upside down V.

"Don't listen to what I just said, Mary. We get tennis shoes like Connie has, we're likely to start painting our pants on each morning."

"You are not kidding." Mary nodded. "That woman can clean with the best of us but I'll bet her personal life would leave you with a bad taste in your mouth."

"Always tickles me when she complains about her damn ulcer."

She's got nothing worse than a case of the hot pants. She wouldn't have room in there for an ulcer, her pants are so tight."

Mary and Edna laughed and the tired lounge chairs gently sighed beneath them. Both women were fat but in different ways. Mary was soft and big with quite a bit of extra skin that wavered like hopeful sails when she spoke. Edna was fat in a compact way, a tiny square-jawed woman who had swallowed too much. Mary plodded, an expansive tiring presence but Edna stayed as sharp as her tongue. Both women had toy poodles at home.

When the coffee was no more than a milliliter of regret in the bottom of the cups Edna and Mary officially started work. Today Edna pushed the cart. It was very square and very metallic and very loaded down. Spray bottles and rags and toilet brushes clung to its sides but it wheeled more like a stretcher than a swaying gypsy cart. Edna and Mary felt the ceremony in what they did. They stopped in front of closed doorways and with comfortable authority and masterkeys let themselves into opposing rooms.

"Lord, it is hot today." Mary flapped the corners of her cleaning smock like a sweaty fat pigeon.

"You think He don't already know that, Mary? Don't know about your Lord, but I'll bet the one I know had a hand in it. We'd better get going, we got this whole floor today."

Edna cleaned with a vigorous hand. She picked up the complimentary disposable ash tray, stuffed it into her garbage sack, swiped the table top with her disinfectant soaked rag, and replaced the tin ash tray with firm disgust. The new tray was a shiny metallic blue, pretty like an exotic goldfish, but Edna didn't notice colors. If she had known that Mary picked out her ash trays by color, stacking and sorting them with pleasure, she would have shaken her little head sadly. Edna just didn't have time for it.

Time went slow with Mary. She sang to herself and walked slow, heel-toe, her feet splayed as she cleaned, ever aware that pay came by the hour. She was an orderly cleaner, wiping the desktops in straight rows neat as the flowerbeds she kept. It was systematic and almost satisfying to take a room from bed-rumpled, towel-damp disorganization to sheet-tight neatness. It was a quiet transformation but it helped Mary forgive the rooms for being dirty. Today she hummed Barry Manilow, letting a "coba" or a "cabanna" roll from her lips in between the gentle thunder. Mary vacuumed neatly, missing whole patches of carpet in her organization. The vacuum was powerful and loud but she had complete control. She finished off the room with a gold ashtray, pretty like a Christmas tree ball, to bring out the tired red of the carpet.

They always seemed to finish at the same time. Just in time to meet over the cart like neighbors over the fence and speak of the spoils of war.

"Anything good so far?" Edna almost always asked, accurate as her watch.

"Nothing but a filthy dirty girly magazine." Mary didn't approve of them no matter how many she threw out. Edna didn't care much one way or the other. "It's either the girl or the next best thing. And we clean it up either way."

Mary's large hand dove into the bucket. Their conversations were generally as repetitious as their days. Big and red with capability, her hands lifted the rag and engulfed it in a tightened fist so the excess water slopped back into the bucket. It was a one-handed action. Edna used both of her smaller hands on her rag, tight like a hawk's claw on a tree. They weren't supposed to take anything from the rooms they cleaned. They weren't supposed to sit in the lounge in the mornings drinking coffee.

Mary used a big bag, plastic-coated like a diaper carrier. Everything would just get thrown out anyway. Edna sometimes used her purse but sometimes she just stashed things on the bottom of the cart. Today she was using the cart.

"Edna, you know that makes me nervous." The skin from Mary's chin jiggled like a harness strap. She wouldn't want anyone talking about her. It was just that they were too old for this sort of thing.

"Mary, we ain't going to jail for a few beach towels and soap slivers. And even if we do it just might be air-conditioned and we won't be the ones cleaning it. Maybe we should try and lift a mink coat and put it on the cart just to make sure we get there."

Mary swallowed but didn't answer. She and Edna were a team.

"Well anyway, they took more than I did. Towels. Bible. Always tickles me how such fine upstanding Christians can stoop to thievery in the name of the Lord."

Edna punctuated by shaking her head. She shook her head a lot. She was a small plaster statue, her oversized head bobbing disgustedly on its spring.

Mary re-wrung her rag. She never knew what to say while Edna was shaking her head. She sensed that Edna didn't even want a reply. Mary's hand in the bucket was slippery with a film of cleaner. Today was Edna's turn with the cart and she had used Forward. Mary preferred Mint. It was milder and smelled like somewhere else. Like anywhere else Mary would rather be at this hour of the day. And even though both buckets looked the same at the end of a day, grey and foul, the

Mint cleaner started out clear and green as pool water.

Edna rolled the cart further down the dingy hall while Mary walked behind pressing a kleenex into the creases of her neck. Her other hand rested at the base of her spine in the stance of pregnancy. It was only Tuesday.

Edna walked square into the middle of her next room, fifth of the day. Seemed to her they were slower than they had been last year but maybe it was just that it was hotter. Edna never sang while she worked, she scolded. "Another towel under the bed. Maybe they think I do Jane Fonda in the morning to get ready for work." She huffed like a kettle as she poked the towel out from under the bed with her mop handle. "Where you headed dustball? I don't have time to follow you around all day. Bad enough I have to follow this belly but I guess if you don't get it coming you get it going." Edna thanked the Lord she had been born clever or she would never have made it through day one. She never missed a corner and she counted down rooms like notches on her belt. Edna never forgave anything for being dirty.

The woman worked through the morning, down the hallway, right into the heavy thick heat of midmorning. Breaktime meant an electric fan and a saturated breeze.

"I've gotta get something into my stomach before I take my pill. And I guess I'll have to have a soda to get it down with, damn horse pill."

"I'll bet the doctor didn't mean a donut when he said to eat something with your pill. Mary, you are running yourself down again just like last summer. Don't you leave me to work with Connie again, she gives me an ulcer just talking about her ulcer."

Mary and Edna smiled together in the artificial breeze. They were louder than they had been in the morning, brave in the legality of their fifteen minute break. Sitting clammy and wet they criticized the large face of Donahue that loomed on the oversized TV screen of the lounge. Mary would have rather watched one of the soaps but Edna liked to keep up on current issues. It was only fifteen minutes anyway. She swallowed and it felt like the pill was taking its time going down.

"I swear he must practice in front of a mirror. Look at that will you, Mary. That man is nothing but theatre. Fake. The way my little granddaughter Bethanne is at parties. Should have seen her at our last get-together. Tickles me to death the way she dances around in and out of everyone's pant legs. Begging for attention. But at least she's cute. Donahue, you are an ugly man. I swear sometimes Bethanne reminds me of my own poodle dancing on her hind legs with that big

pink bow on her head. You've seen that picture of her? Tickles me to death."

Mary nodded. She'd seen Edna's pictures a thousand times if she'd seen them once but she had a dog of her own at home. Chelsey wouldn't wear a bow on her head though. He'd shake it off or pull at it with paws nimble like a tiny monkey's then would look at Mary disgusted.

"Edna, I never can tell if you like Donahue or hate his guts the way you complain about him everyday. Why do you want to watch the old badgering fool anyway? All he ever does is complain. Beats me how you can stand to listen to him complain but let Connie near you and you're like a cat thrown in a pool, drowning in aggravation."

Edna crinkled her little fist around the cellophane cracker wrapper and ignored every comment but those pertaining to Connie.

"You'd better lower it a few notches or old Connie will be in here complaining about something else. And Donahue's over now anyway so heave your heft and let's get at it."

Edna and Mary headed back towards the cart that waited in the dark hallway. They left the lights off to try to fool themselves into believing it was dusk — cool as a day off in the shade. Edna wheeled the cart towards the uncleaned rooms and the women separated once again. The carpet was old ruby red and beaten thin by thousands of feet just passing through. The women's voices volleyed back and forth in the hall like echoes from some strange sport.

"I think it's about time you started talking to the Devil about this heat." Edna was shaking her head, muttering low and muffled. "The Lord may know about it but the Devil's more likely to strike a bargain."

"Edna, you know I'm a Christian." Mary opened her eyes mockingly wide as if Edna had suggested that she eat a box of jelly donuts in the name of the Lord. It could be a useful religion.

"You can call yourself a Christian till the day I catch you stealing a hotel Bible."

Then it was quiet for a long moment while Edna and Mary worked in their respective bathrooms with the shower heads running loud and steaming hot. Water trickled into the dark cave of Edna's upstretched armpit.

Mary sighed and cleared the big looseness of her throat and wiped the humidity from her glasses. She hated bathrooms more than any other part of this job. She could hear Edna scouring emphatically in her room. She closed the door of the bathroom to sweep stray hairs from its corner and a color caught her eye. A blouse hung from the

hook on the back of the door. "Must have been steaming out the wrinkles," thought Mary but she didn't say it. She just looked at the shirt — it was a silky aqua green. It might have fit Edna but it was definitely too small for Mary. Alone in the shower fog, Mary stared at the shirt and then touched a sleeve gingerly, reverently. It rippled with her touch like a pebble tossed into an algae pond. She stopped the rippling, thumb and finger on the corner of the sleeve, letting go slowly. Catching her reflection in the steamed mirror, she thought her eyes seemed dim, filmed over like the protective eyelids of a frog. She closed them and finger pressed her eyeballs deeply into their sockets, trying to push back the heat. With her freckled hand Mary reached for the blouse and shoved it hanger and all into her garbage sack. The hanger protruded from black plastic like a bone trying to break through skin. Edna wouldn't notice. Mary shut off the water making the pipes tremble in the wall and the last of the steam quiver upward. She began to gather up the bleach and grout scrub and bright blue toilet liquid, quickly, sliding water back into the sink with the curve of her free hand. Edna would be in the hall soon. It was getting near lunchtime and everything would just get thrown out anyway.

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